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# U.N. vs. Poverty: Seeking a Focus, Quarreling Over the Vision

By [CELIA W. DUGGER](#)

The United Nations General Assembly meeting today was to have been a rare moment when the quest to relieve the crushing poverty of a billion people took center stage. But so far that goal has been overshadowed by Katrina, the oil-for-food scandal and squabbling over reform of the United Nations itself.

Even the debate about the world's common agenda on global poverty began on an unexpectedly sour note, centered around the goals for healing the world's deepest poverty that were to be in the meeting's final document.

The American ambassador, John R. Bolton, initially proposed expunging any reference to specific goals for reducing poverty, hunger and child mortality and combating pandemics of AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria.

Known as the millennium development goals, they emerged from a United Nations conference five years ago. He favored instead citing the broad declaration from which the goals were drawn.

The United States subsequently relented, but not before the administration's opening foray in the negotiations left some African leaders dismayed.

"The thing that shocked me personally was that they're trying to shift and change goal posts," said Charity Kaluki Ngilu, the Kenyan health minister, who is in New York for the meeting. "If this is the case, we African leaders might as well go home and find other methods of developing ourselves."

Mrs. Ngilu, who said she was stunned by the Bush administration's initial position, added that nonetheless, she credits Mr. Bush's anti-AIDS program with helping [Kenya](#) to increase the number of people being treated for the disease to 45,000, from 2,000.

Administration officials say Mr. Bush has a vision and a record to offer on development. But as of yesterday, with presidents and prime ministers from more than 170 nations converging on New York, he

had yet to put his personal stamp on the debate.

He will undoubtedly address the challenges of fighting global poverty when he speaks today at the United Nations.

But some say he has missed an opportunity to take the lead on poverty - an issue of looming concern in much of the world - even when America itself is preoccupied by terrorism, the war in [Iraq](#) and the aftermath of the hurricane.

At the same time, negotiations at the United Nations got absorbed by the issues around United Nations reform.

"It's a failure of the tactical and policy process inside the administration, perhaps because of distractions," said Nancy Birdsall, the founding president of the Center for Global Development in Washington. "It suggests these development issues aren't that high on the agenda. The administration hasn't seized the moment."

Bush administration officials disagree. They say the [United States](#) is taking a strong lead. They noted that Laura Bush will be attending an event today in New York to highlight American support to African countries fighting malaria.

John A. Simon, senior director for development at the National Security Council, said the administration's priority had been the substance of the summit meeting, not perceptions.

Officials want to be sure that the final document reflects the president's view that development is about more than the amount of aid rich countries provide to poor ones, but also about good government, sound economic policies and private sector growth.

They also wanted to make it plain that the administration, while agreeing on the need for increased aid, has not and will not promise to give 70 cents of every \$100 of national income, as European nations have recently done, with timetables for achieving that level of aid.

"If we do the right things from a policy perspective, the results will speak for themselves," Mr. Simon said yesterday in an e-mail message.

But advocates of the target insist that the United States had already committed to moving toward it in 2002, when Mr. Bush supported a declaration at a summit meeting in Monterrey, [Mexico](#), saying rich countries would "make concrete efforts" to give 0.7 percent of national income in aid.

The United States, the world's largest donor in terms of value, is next to last among richer nations in giving as a share of national income.

In the current negotiations, Mr. Bolton first proposed dropping all references to the target, but later said it could be restored.

The administration's approach and the haggling over the final document contrasts with the way Prime Minister Tony Blair pushed his agenda to alleviate poverty in Africa before the July meeting of the Group of 8 major industrial nations.

Mr. Blair lobbied each leader beforehand. He collaborated with Sir Bob Geldof, the former Boomtown Rats singer, to build public support.

And when the terror bombings in London struck during the Group of 8 talks, Mr. Blair kept them focused on Africa.

He emerged with a commitment from the eight nations to double aid to Africa, to \$50 billion a year, by 2010.

It is not clear that much new will emerge at the United Nations. World leaders are likely to affirm their commitment to push forward with the millennium goals to halve extreme poverty and hunger, cut child mortality by two-thirds and ensure the basic education of each child by 2015, among other things.

Those are the same broad goals agreed to five years ago.

Whatever the verdict on Mr. Bush's role, others are seizing the initiative. Former president Bill Clinton will sponsor a three-day conference in New York beginning tomorrow that will focus on poverty and governing, climate change and conflict.

Among those listed as confirmed participants are Mr. Blair, President Olusegun Obasanjo of [Nigeria](#) and Sonia Gandhi, who leads the governing Congress Party in [India](#).

Jeffrey D. Sachs, an economist who headed the United Nation's Millennium Project and is the author of "The End of Poverty," is developing a new organization called Millennium Promise to test his antipoverty ideas in 100 African villages. MTV will broadcast a documentary today, "The Diary of Angelina Jolie and Dr. Jeffrey Sachs in Africa," that recounts their trip to one such village in Kenya.

At a screening on Monday evening at the Museum of Television and Radio, Professor Sachs said of the coming United Nations meeting, "Maybe what we've got to do is lead by action, and the government will follow along." Ms. Jolie, looking every inch the movie star in a figure-hugging black dress, said, "Europe has stepped up, but America should take the lead, or at least more of a lead."

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